

EDUCATOR/DISCUSSION GUIDE

SPIRIT SLEUTHS: How Magicians and Detectives Exposed the Ghost Hoaxes

Written by Gail Jarrow

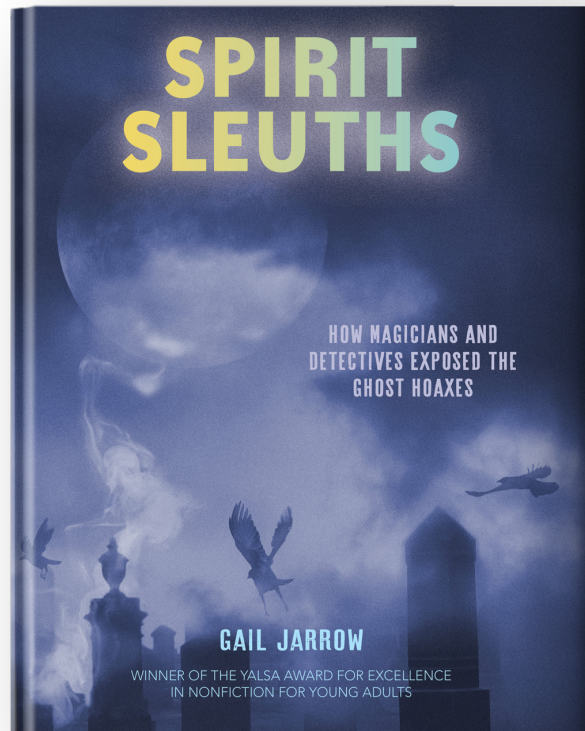
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ABOUT THE BOOK

In *Spirit Sleuths*, award-winning author Gail Jarrow describes the séances and stratagems of the fraudulent mediums, psychics, and fortune tellers who began cropping up in America in the mid-1800s—and reveals how detectives, newspaper reporters, and one very famous magician worked tirelessly to uncover and publicize the deceptions of these spiritualist charlatans.

Using extensive research, Jarrow explains what drove people to spiritualists, how even educated people could be fooled by crafty mediums performing in darkened rooms, and what motivated people like Harry Houdini to try to protect innocent people from losing large sums of money to “ghost hoaxes.”

The period photographs, newspaper headlines, advertisements, and more bring the history of the spiritualism movement to life and illustrate how spiritualism took hold of an eager public nearly 175 years ago and still entralls and ensnares people today.

ASTRA BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS


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PRAISE FOR *SPIRIT SLEUTHS*

★ “A natural and riveting follow-up to Jarrow’s *Spooked* and *The Amazing Harry Kellar*, her previous books about debunking hoaxes and the supernatural. In concise, approachable chapters, the author details the origins of Spiritualism, its popularity and most well-known practitioners, and the sleuths who dedicated their lives to disproving the methods and beliefs that made it popular...The book’s emphasis on how these mediums and psychics used smoke and mirrors to swindle people serves as an excellent tool to teach young readers about the dangers of misinformation. The spacious white pages and photo-filled design add to the work’s readability...The 25 pages of back matter are a librarian’s dream and include an author’s note, timeline, glossary, index, source notes, further reading, and more. The indomitable Jarrow crafts another enthralling narrative of nonfiction that will mesmerize curious readers and serve as an exemplar for educators and researchers.” — ***School Library Journal*, starred review**

“During the height of spiritualism from the 1840s to the 1920s, many so-called mediums fooled their audiences with illusions disproven by some of the most talented stage magicians, including Harry Houdini. But Jarrow’s exploration of what was proven to be fake is also conscious of the true hold spiritualism had on people who believed in the great beyond, cementing the movement as a fascinating moment in cultural history, especially in the U.S. In this title, the wheels of Spiritualism are shown being sped by crowds and slowed by individuals, making for a page-turner of a spooky history book.” —***Booklist***

“In this thoroughly researched study, [Jarrow] singles out two investigators in particular for their persistence: Harry Houdini, who made exposures of séance fakery a regular part of his stage act, and his protégé Rose Mackenberg, a tough-minded private detective and master of disguise who worked with victims and law enforcement to shut down spirit scams for decades after Houdini’s premature death...she [offers] insights into the clever techniques used by both hoaxers and hoax-busters, as well as a timely case study on the persistence of irrational belief in the face of logic and overwhelming negative evidence...Penetrating and provocative.” —***Kirkus Reviews***

“A mesmerizing read that not only details the rise of spiritualism, and the role Houdini played in debunking it, but implores readers to rely on critical thinking skills to evade deception.” —***Publishers Weekly***

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH

In the first chapter, the author describes the setting at a séance. What were some of the unusual events occurring in that room?

What did Margaretta and Catharine Fox claim in 1848? Why did their parents send them to live with their sister in Rochester, New York? How did the author describe the mindsets of people who resided in that part of the state?

“Thousands of Americans were convinced that spirits could contact the living.” (17) What were some of the ways that “spirits” made themselves known at séances?

Table Tipping. Rappings. Glowing Spirit Trumpets. These were some of the “tricks” mediums used to convince customers they were communicating with the spirit world. How did the mediums perform these tricks? Why were séances held in dark rooms?

As the séances became more popular, “magicians took notice.” (19) Who were Ira and William Davenport? The Davenports were called gifted mediums, but what were they truly gifted at doing?

Who was John Nevil Maskelyne? What did he witness at the Davenport brothers’ performance? How did Maskelyne become famous as well?

When did Harry Kellar join the Davenports? What was Kellar’s ambition? How were his performances different from the Davenports’ séances? How did Kellar, Maskelyne, and other magicians create doubts about spiritualism?

As spiritualism faced increased scrutiny, mediums created new ways to persuade people to believe. How did mediums use tricks like materialization, spirit writing, and slate writing to fool unsuspecting clients?

What was the Seybert Commission for Investigating Modern Spiritualism? What did commission members discover? How did Harry Kellar surprise the commission?

Erik Weisz was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1874. Four years later, his family emigrated to the United States, and, at the age of 17, Erik changed his name. What was his new name? Who was Mademoiselle Beatrice, and what roles did the two of them play in the spiritualist movement? How did their views on the spiritualist movement change?

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Harry Houdini and his partner, Bess, became world famous for their illusions. Harry even performed for President Theodore Roosevelt. Where did Houdini perform for the president? When Roosevelt asked Houdini about spiritualism, what did Houdini tell him?

Houdini traveled back to London after World War I. He corresponded with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle about the Davenport brothers, and the two became friends. Who was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle? What brought him to spiritualism? How were Conan Doyle's views on spiritualism different from Houdini's? What happened that led to the end of their friendship?

In 1923, *Scientific American* offered prize money for evidence of supernatural phenomena. Who did they select to judge the contest? How was Houdini involved with the contest? Who was Margery, a.k.a. Mina Crandon? What were some of the methods Houdini used to disprove Margery's "manifestations?" Did anyone win the prize money?

Houdini "was troubled by tragedies involving people who had been taken in by spiritualist ideas." (86) How did Houdini expose fraudulent mediums? Who was Rose Mackenberg? What did Mackenberg do to help Houdini expose Pierre Keeler and other well-known mediums?

"If any genuine medium could create a spirit manifestation that he was unable to imitate, Houdini promised a prize of \$10,000 (more than \$150,000 today)." (95) Did anyone ever win the prize money from Houdini?

In 1926, Houdini and Mackenberg testified before Congress at several hearings. What evidence did they present? What were the hearings about? What was the outcome of the hearings?

Harry Houdini passed away on October 31, 1926. How did he die? What did he share with his wife and some friends before he died? How did his wife try to communicate with him after his death? Was she successful?

After Houdini's death, Rose Mackenberg continued to investigate spiritualism scams. How successful was Mackenberg at catching dishonest mediums? What methods did she use to gather evidence against scammers? What were some of the ways she educated the public about fake mediums and bogus séances?

Who was Mary Sullivan? What campaign was she in charge of in 1931? Did Sullivan believe it was possible to eradicate illegal fortune-telling?

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What are some modern-day psychic scams? How does technology help mediums dupe more customers?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Abraham Lincoln “hosted a widely publicized White House séance during the Civil War.” Why was Lincoln’s wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, particularly interested in spiritualism? What role do you think the Civil War played in rise of spiritualism? (29) Fifty years later, spiritualism’s popularity had waned, but events brought it back to the forefront: “For many, spiritualism had become a form of entertainment rather than a religion. All that changed in 1914.” (59) What was happening in the world in 1914? Why do you think this event—and a global influenza pandemic in 1918—caused spiritualism to surge in popularity again?

The secretary of the Seybert Commission wrote, “I have been forced to the conclusion that Spiritualism ... presents the melancholy spectacle of gross fraud, perpetrated upon an uncritical portion of the community.” (44) What do the words “melancholy” and “gross” reveal about the secretary’s opinion of spiritualism? What does he mean by “uncritical?”

Look at the advertisement from 1868 on page 26. What are some of the claims made in the advertisement? Think about advertisements for events today. How are they similar? How are they different?

Harry Houdini and his wife, Bess, performed as a team: “Like many other conjurers in the late 1800s, they incorporated supernatural elements into their stage act, such as fortune-telling and mind reading.” (54) On page 69, the author describes how the Houdinis performed one mind-reading trick using code words. Do you think you could manage to pull off that same trick? What were some of the methods mediums used to pretend to read minds?

Harry Houdini challenged Sir Arthur Conan Doyle about his beliefs in the supernatural: “Houdini implored his friend not to assume things were supernatural just because he had no other explanation.” (68) Houdini had extensive experience with creating illusions, and he believed “his many years as conjurer allowed him to see trickery when scientists and other highly educated investigators could not.” (75) Yet Conan Doyle continued to believe—even writing to Houdini’s wife after Harry’s death “saying that he felt sure Houdini had psychic powers.” Conan Doyle’s most famous literary creation, Sherlock Holmes, is known for his use of logic and his skills of observation. How was Conan Doyle different from his famous detective?

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Rose Mackenberg told a newspaper reporter, “It’s really awful disappointing. I’d love to find one good solid ghost I could sit down and have a pleasant chat with.” (125) What role did newspapers, pamphlets, books, radio, and television play in spreading ideas—positive and negative—about spiritualism? How has the media about mediums changed over the last 175 years?

“In 2022, people in the United States spent more than \$2.2 billion a year on psychic services.” (130) See if you can discover what laws or regulations exist in your area to protect people from unscrupulous psychics and mediums.

“Today, magicians continue to expose fraudulent psychics and ruthless mediums by replicating supposedly mystical feats.” (139) Check out the links under “Debunking the Supernatural” in the More to Explore section of the book. How are magicians disproving psychics today?

EXTRA CREDIT + SUGGESTED READING

“The first Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention would be held in July 1848, about 25 miles (40 km) from the Fox house in Hydesville.” (13) What was the Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention? What was the Declaration of Sentiments? Who were the leaders of the women’s rights movement at that time? Who was Frederick Douglass and what was his role at the convention?

William Mumler sold his “spirit photographs” first in Boston and then later in New York City. While his efforts to make money in spiritualism were lucrative, he also had legitimate successes. What did he discover in the late 1870s that led to a “revolutionary change in the appearance of newspapers?” (35) How have newspapers changed since Mumler’s breakthrough?

“To get around laws against defrauding people, mediums set up spiritualist churches. This protected them under the US Constitution’s First Amendment, which provides freedom of religion.” (96) What other freedoms are guaranteed in the First Amendment? Former Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote: “The First Amendment is often inconvenient. But that is beside the point. Inconvenience does not absolve the government of its obligation to tolerate speech.” What do you think the judge meant by “inconvenient?”

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“The disclosures by former mediums, newspaper exposes, and the Seybert report helped to cool the public’s enthusiasm for spiritualism. Yet one editor wasn’t so sure it would last ... he wrote, “Spiritualistic imposters will find as many fools as ever and continue to make their cheats profitable.” (49) Can you think of any other ruses that have fooled the public, even after those ruses have been debunked? Author Gail Jarrow wrote a book about one such hoax called *Spooked!* For another example, read *Loch Ness Uncovered* by Rebecca Siegel.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created one of the most famous detectives of all time—Sherlock Holmes. Read a short story featuring Sherlock Holmes, like “The Adventure of the Speckled Band.”

“During the 1840s—a time before vaccines, antibiotics, and other effective medicines—diseases often tragically and prematurely ended lives.” (14) Spiritualism flourished because so many people lost loved ones at young ages to diseases like smallpox, diphtheria, and tuberculosis—and survivors in their grief wanted to communicate with those lost loved ones. Author Gail Jarrow has written several books about diseases that ravaged the US at different times in its history. To learn more, read *Red Madness*, *American Murderer*, *Fatal Fever*, or *Bubonic Panic*.

Nearly 100 years after his death, Harry Houdini remains a household name. To find out more about Houdini, read *Escape: The Story of the Great Houdini* by Sid Fleischman. You can also learn more about magician Harry Kellar in Jarrow’s *The Amazing Harry Kellar*.

Guide written by Jane Becker